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ABSTRACT

Declining enrollment means that school districts must engage in thoughtful, thorough planning to cope with this trend, according to the author. His paper outlines a process for school closing, including ways to involve the community in the decision-making process, thereby reducing the likelihood of community conflict and preserving the school district's credibility. This paper also briefly outlines suggestions for reducing school staffs, utilizing surplus space, conserving resources, handling student transportation problems, mustering support for board of education decisions, and implementing the board's plans for coping with decline. (Author/DS)

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1. Is the Problem Real?

Superintendent Robert Savitt of Plainville, New York, has probably said it better than most. "Superintendents who fail to act in the face of declining enrollments for fear of offending the staff or community are derelict in their duty and are heading for disaster." Many superintendent, having lived through a period of growth, are now burying their heads in the sand and hoping that the problem of declining enrollments will disappear. It won't. The simple fact is that it will intensify.

Public school enrollment, which mushroomed in the 1950's and began to level off at the end of the 60's, will show a rather sharp drop between now and 1982.

That is the projection of the U. S. Office of Education in a report, "Projections of Educational Statistics to 1982-83". A digest of the report was issued in mid-April by the Educational Research Service, Inc., an independent research firm sponsored by administrative organizations including AASA.

The ERS report showed, for instance, that public high school enrollment, which shot up 38 percent between the fall of 1962 and the fall of 1972, will actually drop by 13 percent--that's a loss of 1.8 million youngsters by 1982. Enrollment in the lower grades (K-8) which went up 11 percent during the same period, will fall off 10 percent with a projected drop of 3.1 million youngsters by 1982.

Overall, including elementary and high school students, the projection predicts a decline from the fall 1972 public school enrollment of 45.8 million to 40.8 million in 1982 - a drop of 11 percent.

It is easy to see that a loss of 5 million students in a ten year period will have severe effects on school districts throughout the nation.

Here are some examples of what has happened:

- . Salt Lake City School District grew to 42,000 students and is now down to 26,000. We have closed 24 schools - both elementary and secondary. A number of these schools have been built in the last 10 years.
- . Birmingham, Michigan, School District has decreased by 20 percent in the last five years.
- . Arlington Heights, Illinois, High School District 214, has projected to reach 25,000, but at 17,000 it has begun to decline.
- . Santa Clara Unified School District in Santa Clara, California, experienced a sharp rise and is now undergoing a similarly sharp decrease. Last year it closed four relatively new schools.
- . The same is true in New York, California, Illinois, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and many other states.

America, and indeed most of the world society, has experienced growth in many different forms. Most of us have lived through and experienced growth throughout most of our lives. In 1965 in Elk Grove, Illinois, the school district was growing at the rate of 1,000 students per year. At that time the district had 8,500 students and they were projecting a building program for 15,000 students. Growth, however, did not go beyond 12,000 and the district is now down to 8,000.

It would seem to be good strategy, therefore, at the present moment to devote intellectual resources to the study of decline so that we may be better informed about what kinds of strategy are successful, what sort

of leadership adapts best, and what kind of institutions have survival value in declining situations, as these may be very different from what are appropriate to situations of rapid expansion. What to do in cases of declining enrollments can be some of the most painful acts that responsible people must do. (We lost a superintendent in this process - people that had never had an interest in the School Board suddenly wanted to become members.)

2. An Effective Process for Closing Schools.

One of the basic skills required in a declining enrollment district is that of closing schools. We must be able to consolidate and still maintain public support. A basic rule is to adjust to a reduced income, the District must operate on fewer units. The pain of closing schools is less severe than the pain of having inadequate money to operate the District.

a. Controlling community conflict (A major problem). Community conflict often accompanies school closure. No one appreciates the closing of a neighborhood school. (Unless it is someone else's.) Talking about the possibility creates fears, hostility, and organized opposition. While community conflict cannot be avoided, it can be controlled by intelligent leadership by the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools.

The process for controlling conflict is one that requires a great deal of time and effort. It also requires the assistance of many segments of the community. And what may be effective in one community may not be effective in others. Decisions must be made about:

1. The use of citizens committees. As people become involved in making decisions they also become committed to them.
2. The use of local consultants. The broader the base of decisions the more likely they can be and will be accepted.
3. The use of outside consultants. It can be invaluable to know how other districts and individuals have met similar problems.
4. The preparation of demographics. (A statistical study of the population.) Whenever you close schools you must know where the students are and where they will be.
5. The use of community surveys. The greater your input on the way that people feel and think the greater your chance of success.
6. The use of staff personnel. Unless you have the support of those close to you, you are programmed for failure.
7. The release of information. It is vital to any planning to keep people informed about what is developing - what you are doing and considering.
8. Involvement of the Media. Wise involvement of the media will mean support you cannot afford to lose.

Here is, basically, the plan and process we followed in Salt Lake City. We believe the process was the best that could be developed under very difficult circumstances. We have found it to be successful for us.

Step 1. Establish a comprehensive citizens' committee to study the problem and make recommendations to the Board of Education.

We basically used PTA leaders and community members with interest in education.

- a. Provide assistance to the committee.
- b. We gave them a specific charge of what they were to do.
- c. Set a date for the final report and do not extend the time.
- d. Make the report public at the same time it is given to the Board of Education. Basic to the plan is that reasonable people will arrive at the same logical answer if they have the same information.

Step 2. Hold public meetings to discuss the report, to develop tentative solutions, and to receive additional information.

- a. Discuss implication of conflict on the school district.
- b. Present problem-solving process to the public.
- c. Give and receive information. Let the public know the real reasons.
- d. Record all information presented at public hearings.

Step 3. Develop alternative solutions and modify them if necessary.

Step 4. Present final solution at a general public meeting.

Step 5. Take action an an official Board of Education meeting.

Step 6. Implement Board of Education decisions.

b. Preserving school credibility. The process of decision-making must have integrity. Often the Board of Education is accused of having a hidden plan or having made a previous decision. Many want to believe that the public meetings are not important and that the Board of Education does not really want to hear the public. To preserve credibility we found that the following practices were helpful.

1. Make all information public at the same time it is given to the Board of Education.
2. Hold only public meetings. Agree not to have executive sessions during a school closure process.
3. Send all reports to community decision-makers.
4. Establish tentative solutions and show modifications made because of public hearings.
5. Work closely with the media. Keep them informed at all times. Encourage the publication of what is happening and the reasons.
6. Keep parents and students informed. Mail out newsletters, invitations to public hearings, summary of tentative solutions, and modifications considered.

c. Developing concensus. The following items are needed in order to develop community concensus.

1. A process which is open, which has integrity, and which has credibility.
2. Develop a basic school closure criteria. (Salt Lake City and Birmingham, Michigan)

3. Support of the opinion leaders.
4. Concensus on the Board of Education (if possible).
5. Support of the employees of the school district.
6. Agreement between the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

Obtaining any kind of concensus on school closure is extremely difficult. Neveththeless, it is possible if everything works well. Especially important is the editorial position of the local media. We in Salt Lake City were fortunate to have strong editorial support from both the TV stations and the newspapers. When the final Board decisions were made, the media supported the decisions and requested the public to do so also.

The problem-solving process has also been used in other areas of potential conflict. Two policies which are used to control community conflicts are these:

1. The Review of Services Process. (Anyone can request this and a committee is organized.)
2. The Educational Audit Process. (same as #1)
3. Bread and Butter Issues

School districts faced with declining enrollments have a number of bread and butter issues. It is the job of the superintendent and the Board of Education to find acceptable ways:

- a. To reduce staffs (very painful).
- b. To utilize or sell surplus space.
- c. To conserve money.
- d. To increase transportation services.
- e. To obtain support for Board of Education decisions.

Each of these areas is potentially dangerous and can cause a host of

problems for the most experienced superintendent. We can learn something from districts who have already wrestled with them. Here are some ideas you may wish to consider in each of these areas.

a. Reducing school staffs

1. Staffing at projected mid-year enrollments.
2. Early retirement. Building incentives which can speed up attrition.
3. Trained substitutes. When you lose teachers, substitutes can fill in for the remainder of the school year.
4. Working with neighborhood districts. Find new jobs for teachers that you no longer need.
5. Special projects. Develop Federal and State funded projects where you can move personnel that are no longer needed.
6. Training secondary teachers for elementary positions.
7. Reducing staff through stronger termination for cause procedures. (Remediation process)

b. Utilizing surplus space

1. Rentals to other agencies.
2. Sales at the highest bid.
3. Use for supplementary services.
4. Special education centers for several districts.

c. Conserving resources

1. Staffing at mid-year enrollments.
2. Holding to staffing ratios.
3. Rent out surplus space.
4. Adopting early retirement plans.
5. Decentralizing budget accounts. General funds vrs. specific ones.
6. Developing a review of new program procedure. Sunset type review.

d. Handling the busing problem. With fewer schools more students must be provided with transportation.

1. Showing the neighborhood concept.
2. Contracting for additional transportation services.
3. Passing legislation for more transportation revenue.
4. Providing open enrollment options.
5. Answering questions of psychological damage of moving.
(parent attitudes)

e. Support for Board of Education decisions.

1. The role of the principals.
2. The role of teacher's association.
3. The role of Board members.
4. The role of the superintendent.
5. The role of employees.

Support for Board of Education decisions should be immediate and total. If there is any division among the groups, the public will take advantage of the crack to ask for a review of the decisions. When doubt exists among employees, parents will continue to harass board members and the superintendent.

Support for Board decisions can be demonstrated by quick action on the part of principals and Central office staff. The more decisive the action the more credibility in the minds of everyone.

5. The Consolidation Effort

One especially important item is the ability of the administration to implement quickly the decisions of the Board of Education. The administration must be ready to place into operation a detailed plan to implement quickly Board of Education decisions, the day after decisions are made. Here is an outline of what must be done:

I. Immediate Items

- A. Personnel allocations - Where will they go? Personnel need assurances. Place librarians as Media aides until job opens.
- B. Course selections and student scheduling.
- C. Student and parent orientation.
- D. Curriculum content.
- E. Training - junior high to elementary, etc.
- F. Transportation.
- G. Student activities program. What does the new program offer?
- H. Assignment of administrators - where will they go?
- I. Budget implications - money!
 - 1. Additional help during transition period.
 - 2. Equipment needs - where will old equipment go?
 - 3. Textbooks - different ones in junior high schools.
 - 4. Supplies
 - 5. Books from libraries. How do you disperse?
- J. Public Information Program
- K. Building remodeling
 - 1. P. E. Facilities
 - 2. Lockers
 - 3. Media
 - 4. Shops - Home Economics
 - 5. Rooms? Art, Science, etc.

II. Assignment of Responsibilities - use staff for these responsibilities.

- A. Curriculum adaptations and teacher re-orientation.
- B. Budget implications and incidental expenses.
- C. Athletic activities and activities program adaptations.
- D. Building and furniture distribution.
- E. Textbook, supply, and equipment distribution.
- F. Transportation adjustments.

III. Problems for future consideration.

- A. Distribution of Library books.
- B. Parent orientation and public information.
- C. Adjustments in studentbody officers and student representation.
- D. Parent participation in school governance - new units.

It is important that a calendar be established and that someone be assigned to monitor the completion of each task. A monitoring schedule is given to each staff person and one member is assigned the responsibility of seeing to it that all tasks are complete on schedule.

Special services must be provided to displaced students and parents. No reduction of services should be implemented.

5. Finally - Can We Survive Declining Enrollments?

We, as school officials, will be able to survive declining enrollments in much the same manner as we have survived growth, collective negotiations, accountability, and reduced budgets. Declining enrollments, however, will require more planning and more sensitive skills.

The general decline in the fertility rate is a more serious problem than a decline in a single area like agriculture or mining. When there is

a general decline in the total population, the waves to decline affect the entire society. Therefore, the problems become more difficult to attack.

In an advancing society people are almost sucked out of a declining industry by the jobs created by the expanding ones. If there is little expansion in other parts of the society, then the transfer out of the declining industries may be difficult and adjustment to decline become a much more serious social problem. I am not suggesting that we are facing these problems immediately. I do not expect a stationary population in the United States for many decades and I do not expect stationary real incomes for perhaps an even longer period. I do, however, expect a considerable slowdown in the rate of expansion of population and in the rate of increase of real income. This will affect one segment of society after another, so that the sooner we begin thinking about these problems of adjustment to decline the better prepared we will be for what lies ahead. Education, as I suggested, will be the first major segment of the society to be affected by decline and we are already well into this period.